

Polonius vs. Nachmanides (Korach)

Advice is like snow – the softer it falls, the longer it dwells upon, and the deeper it sinks into the mind. – Samuel Taylor Coleridge

As the summer begins and young people set off into the broader world, often without close supervision for the first time, it's a moment that invites reflection. What wisdom is worth passing on? What advice truly endures?

One timeless insight comes from Rabbi Ovadia Sforno.

In the rebellion of Korach, Datan, and Aviram (Numbers Chapter 16), Moses warns the bystanders to step away from the rebels. Sforno explains that even if the bystanders were themselves innocent, their proximity to wrongdoing could still bring consequences. Sometimes, merely standing too close to trouble is enough to be swept into the fallout.

Another classic source of parting wisdom is found in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 3 – Polonius' advice to his son Laertes:

"The wind sits in the shoulder of your sail,
And you are stay'd for. There – my blessing with thee!
And these few precepts in thy memory
Look thou character. Give thy thoughts no tongue,
Nor any unproportion'd thought his act....
Neither a borrower nor a lender be;
For loan oft loses both itself and friend,
And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry.
This above all – to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man."

It is rich in practical counsel, cautious speech, loyal friendship, prudent financial habits, but it reflects a secular, somewhat self-protective philosophy. Judaism might critique elements of it, especially the discouragement of lending to others.

By contrast, consider the letter Nachmanides (Ramban) wrote to his son, Nachman. Written around 1267 in Acre and sent to his son in Spain, this letter has been cherished across generations and is found in the back of many traditional siddurim (prayer books). Its values are spiritual, humble, and God-centered. Here is a brief summary of Ramban's guidance:

- Speak gently
- Avoid anger
- Be humble
- Fear God
- Reflect often
- Guard against sin
- Be content with your lot
- Let God's spirit rest upon you
- Reject pride
- Remember that all people are equal before God
- Imagine you are always in God's presence
- Speak with reverence
- Act with restraint
- Respond gently to all
- Study Torah diligently
- Put your learning into action
- Review your actions each morning and evening
- Purify your thoughts before prayer
- Think before you speak

"Review this letter weekly. If you do so, heaven will answer the desires of your heart."

May we and our children grow familiar with wise advice, learn to distinguish the worthwhile from the hollow, and may we strive to live by it, for their sake and for our own.

Shabbat Shalom,

Ben-Tzion

Dedication

To the US attack on Iran's nuclear facilities.